CLAIMS

1. A method comprising

distributing authorization keys from a subscription server to computers on which copies of an application program are to be run, each of the authorization keys being associated with a validity period during which the authorization key will be valid, and

at intermittent times that may be as infrequent as the times when the validity periods end, distributing new authorization keys to each of the computers, the keys being distributed electronically in a manner that is transparent to users of the computers.

2. The method of claim 1 in which the new authorization keys are distributed in exchange for money.

3. The method claim 1 in which each new authorization key is distributed automatically when an existing authorization key has reached the end of its validity period.

4. The method of claim 1 in which the authorization key carries information about the validity period.

5. The method of claim 1 in which the new authorization keys are distributed by communication between the subscription server and each of the computers using a standard communication protocol on a publicly accessible communication network.

6. The method of claim 1 in which the validity period comprises a normal calendar period. — Fig. 6.

7. The method of claim 6 in which the validity period — Fig. 6

comprises a month.

8. The method of claim 1 also including

when a validity period lapses, automatically providing a grace period based on information contained in the authorization key, the grace period permitting continued running of the application program.

9. The method of claim 8 in which the authorization key carries information about the grace period.

10. The method of claim 1 in which each of the authorization keys carries information about the identity of a computer on which use of the application computer is authorized.

11. The method of claim 1 in which each of the authorization keys carries information about features of the application program that are enabled by the key.

12. The method of claim 10 in which the identity comprises information stored on a microprocessor, a hard disk, or a network interface card.

13. The method of claim 1 in which the application program is distributed on a portable medium or by a software download via the Internet.

14. The method of claim 10 in which the subscription server associates the identity of each of the computers with a unique user

identifier and uses the association in connection with distributing new authorization keys.

15. The method of claim 1 in which use of the application program by a user may be transferred to use on another computer under control of the subscription server by issuing a new authorization key associated with the identity of the other computer and with the user.

16. The method of claim 1 in which the authorization keys are distributed in response to instructions given by a user interactively using a standard TCP/IP communication to the subscription server.

17. The method of claim 1 in which the application program automatically initiates communication with the subscription server to update the authorization keys at the ends of the validity periods.

18. The method of claim 1 in which the application program may be used for a period as long as the validity period while the computer on which it is running is out of communication with the subscription server.

19. The method of claim 1 in which users of the copies of the application programs are grouped within enterprises and the enterprise interacts with the subscription server to manage the number and duration of authorization keys that are distributed to its users and the payment for the authorization keys.

20. The method of claim 1 in which the authorization keys are stored on the user computers.

21. The method of claim 1 also including

when one of the copies of the application program is to be run at one of the computers, determining whether the identity of the computer conforms to the authorization key that was distributed to that computer and whether the validity period is in effect, and

if so, permitting the application program to be run.

22. The method of claim 1 in which the authorization key is encrypted.

23. The method of claim 1 in which a user self-subscribes to the use of the application program without help of another person.

24. The method of claim 1 in which the subscription server comprises an Internet server using a standard TCP/IP protocol.

25. The method of claim 1 in which the application program may be run in at least two different modes of use.

26. The method of claim 25 in which one of the modes does not require an authorization key.

27. The method of claim 25 in which at least one of the modes requires an authorization key.

28. The method of claim 25 in which at least one of the modes comprises a demonstration mode in which some features of the application program are disabled.

29. The method of claim 25 in which at least one of the modes comprises a subscription mode.

30. The method of claim 25 in which at least one of the modes comprises full use of the application program and the authorization key is distributed in exchange for a payment.

31. The method of claim 25 in which at least one of the modes is defined by a selection of available features of the application program.

32. A method comprising

distributing without charge, copies of an application program online or on storage media,

enabling a user of one of the computers to choose among modes in which he wishes to run the application program,

in at least one of the chosen modes, enabling the user to run the application program without requiring the user to provide information about the user,

in at least another one of the chosen modes, requiring the user to self-register by providing information about the user in exchange for an authorization key that is associated with a unique identifier of the computer on which the application program is to run and which enables the application to be run in the chosen mode, the authorization key having a limited validity period

33. The method of claim 32 in which one mode comprises a demonstration mode that does not require any information or payment.

34. The method of claim 32 in which one mode comprises a trial mode that requires information but no payment.

35. The method of claim 32 in which one mode comprises a subscription mode that requires information and payment.

36. The method of claim 32 in which the modes are defined by selections of features of the application.

37. The method of claim 32 in which use of the application program by a user may be transferred for use on another computer under control of the subscription server by issuing a new authorization key associated with the identity of the other computer and with the user.

38. The method of claim 32 in which the application program is distributed on a portable medium or by a software download through the Internet.

39. The method of claim 32 in which the authorization keys are distributed in response to instructions given by a user interactively using a standard TCP/IP communication to the subscription server.

40. The method of claim 32 in which the application program may be used for a period as long as the validity period while the computer on which it is running is out of communication with the subscription server.

41. The method of claim 32 in which users of the copies of the application programs are grouped within enterprises and each of the enterprises interacts with the subscription server to manage the number and duration of authorization keys that are distributed to its users and the payment for the authorization keys.

42. The method of claim 32 in which the authorization keys are stored on the user computers.

43. A method comprising

receiving at a subscription server, information identifying individual users who are to be permitted to use copies of an application program on computers,

when one of the users first attempts to use a copy of the application program on one of the computers, sending the identity of the user to the subscription server electronically,

at the server, matching the user identity with the information identifying individual users, and, if they match,

providing an authorization key to the computer, the authorization key being associated uniquely with the computer from which the user is attempting to use the copy of the application program.